

**MICHIGAN**

# Opponents of COVID restrictions took over a Michigan county. They want deep cuts to health funding

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*Holland, Mich.* — The fastest growing county in Michigan has seen its local government transformed in the wake of backlash to pandemic restrictions, and the new commissioners — claiming COVID is over — are threatening to cut millions of dollars from the county’s health department.

Local public health officials say the potential loss of funding could severely impact several essential services, including vaccines, cancer screening and testing for sexually transmitted infections. These proposed cuts also come after the board attempted to replace the county’s top health official, sparking a monthslong legal battle.

A national public health expert said the situation is unique in the U.S. and a threat to the entire public health field — especially going into an election year when health officials and their department could again become political targets.

“Of the hundreds, maybe thousands of public health officials who were fired during the pandemic, I’m trying to find a single example where they’ve retaliated against the entire department like this,” said Lori Freeman, the executive director of the National Association of County and City Health Officials. “I’m hoping this isn’t the start of a new trend of retroactive punishment against public health departments.”

More than 300,000 people live in Ottawa County, making it Michigan's seventh largest county. Millions visit its miles of sandy beaches along Lake Michigan and the renowned tulip and coast guard festivals. The county is also home to furniture maker Herman Miller.

The political battle here began in fall 2021, when the group Ottawa Impact, founded by Joe Moss and Sylvia Rhodea, supported an unsuccessful lawsuit against the county over a mask

mandate. Then the group ran a slate of candidates against Republican incumbents and won eight of 11 seats on the county board of commissioners — Moss and Rhodea included.

At the new board's first meeting, they voted to close the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion office and change the county's motto to "Where Freedom Rings." They fired the county administrator and appointed John Gibbs, a former far-right congressional candidate who has since repeatedly declared that "COVID is over."

The new majority also voted to replace administrative health officer Adeline Hambley, who oversees the public health department, with a candidate who had no previous public health experience.

"It's pretty clear now that they were always hyper-focused on really going after the health department," said Ottawa County Commissioner Jacob Bonnema, who was elected as part of Ottawa Impact but has since distanced himself. He added that he's OK with reducing funding for departments when it's not "completely indiscriminate"

While some county officials quietly left their positions under the new regime, Hambley stayed — and sued the new commissioners for "termination in violation of public policy." A judge temporarily blocked the commissioners from removing Hambley, saying she can't be fired without "just cause."

Then late last month, with the legal battle as a backdrop, Hambley said she was given 48 hours to propose a budget that would cut the county's general contribution for the next year in half — \$6.4 million to \$2.5 million. She took to social media, saying the cuts could effectively shutter the department.

"It's hard to believe that the budget cut isn't retaliatory both for frustration at COVID actions that they don't agree with and not being able to remove me for a political appointee," Hambley told The Associated Press.

Hundreds of people rallied outside of the health department in support of Hambley after the warnings, which Gibbs and Moss have called "media theatrics."

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On Sept. 5, the commission released a new budget proposal with \$4.3 million from the general fund — still about \$2 million less than Hambley had asked for — and requested the department decline all grant funding related to COVID-19.

Under the current proposal, a family planning program that also provides things like cancer screenings for those without insurance would see its budget reduced by 40%. Money that goes toward STI testing would be cut by 44%, and a mobile dental health clinic that goes to places like schools and jails would lose nearly 20% of its funding.

Moss told the AP in an email that no other department saw similar cost increases in the past several years, “nor did they respond to the pandemic in the same way the health department did.” He added he supports “public health efforts that respect constitutional freedoms and parental rights.”

The final vote on the health department’s budget is scheduled for Sept. 26 — and it has the public’s attention. More than 100 community members turned out for Tuesday’s public hearing on the health budget, with many speakers criticizing the commissioners’ actions towards Hambley and the department.

“You were all elected with a moral obligation and duty to serve all the people of the county, including those with the greatest needs,” a Grand Haven resident said. “You should not be at war with your health providers.”

The Network for Public Health Law and the National Association of County and City Health Officials filed amicus briefs in support of Hambley’s lawsuit last month. NAACHO typically reserves that for legal action with national implications.

And Freeman said her organization is keeping a close eye on Ottawa County: “This isn’t something we want on the books for other county commissioners to consider in the future.”